

Management discourse: Talking the power walk in organizational communication - By: BIRGITTE NORLYK

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How does management talk the power walk in organizations? By giving straightforward orders since this is a traditional managerial prerogative which does not require an understanding of the subtleties of discourse and the finer aspects of interpersonal communication? Or should management avoid potentially face-threatening orders and concentrate on subtle and discreet manifestations of power in which discourse becomes an important tool when communicating with internal and external stakeholders?

In other words: Does management communication of power consist of simply telling people what to do – or does the execution of managerial power depend on a more sophisticated and subtle understanding of the discreet interaction between managerial communication and managerial power?

Perspectives on power and management discourse

The study of managerial power and its linguistic manifestations e.g. in discourse choices and preferred metaphors have been a hot subject in several studies of organizational communication. The dynamic and complex interplay between power, discourse, and communicative skills in organizational life has fascinated academics and practitioners alike.

Consequently, the administration and execution of managerial power has been studied from several linguistic and communicative perspectives: a discourse perspective in which focus has been on choice of metaphors (Deetz, 1986, Mumby, 1988), a rhetorical perspective which underlines the influence of rhetorical choices and stylistics (Cheney 1991), and from a social and organisational perspective in which the interplay between language, power and relational aspects has been the focus of attention (Fairclough, 1999).

Organizational theories and the reinterpretation of power

Management's choice of words, metaphors and communication style

has multiple functions in organizational communication. According to Morgan (1993:4) 'the use of metaphor implies a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally.' Thus, management discourse, including its favoured metaphors, its professional jargon and its preferred rhetorical and stylistic choices subtly establishes the cognitive framework in which power can be legitimately executed within the organization.

At the level of discourse, power is expressed in different metaphors and in different types of managerial jargon, according to the specific organizational context and the dominant organizational theory of the time. The language of power reflects that different organizational theories have different views on the function of management and managerial power.

Organizational theories and organizational fashions change and so does the discourse of power. The role of the manager changes according to the organizational paradigm in question and new norms and ideals of leadership must be implemented. Consequently, the concepts of power and successful management are reinterpreted according to the organizational theory in fashion.

This constant need for interpretations and reinterpretations of power, both in actions and in words, requires communicative as well as linguistic, stylistic and rhetorical skills. The language of power changes over time as it must reflect the ideals of the specific organizational theory in fashion. Referring to different, established organizational theories, e.g. classical management and Human Resources, the following sections illustrate how the changing discourse of management reflects and legitimizes different aspects of managerial power. The preferred metaphors of managerial discourse influence us at two levels: metaphors determine both what we see – and what we do not see.

Discourse and power in classical management theory

The staging of power takes different forms in organizational life. In classical management theory as described by Frederick Taylor (1911) and Henry Fayol, managerial power is legitimized through a set of metaphors which highlights the importance of hierarchy and control.

As classical management theory was conceived by engineers and technical specialists, the central metaphor naturally was that of a smoothly running machine and the job of the manager was to secure that the machine was performing to its maximum capacity. Central values consisted of specialization, fragmentation of the work process, and increased standardisation - all requiring a high degree

of constant managerial control.

This mechanical view of organizations is reflected in the discourse and dominant metaphors of classical management. Following the all-dominant machine metaphor, employees are implicitly considered replaceable parts or human cogs in the overall organizational machinery. Management discourse reflects and legitimizes power in the technical and rational terms of the supreme engineer/manager who fixes the machinery and prevents mechanical breakdowns.

Typical classical metaphors:

- In a classical context the manager is the supreme engineer who operates and controls the organization/machine
- A well-oiled machine
- A smoothly running operation
- A spanner in the works
- A spoke in the wheel
- A management toolbox

Human resources and the inclusive power discourse

From the mid 19th century, classical management theory and its understanding of the organization as a machine were challenged by new ideals of management. New organizational theories such as Human relations and Human resources established a different mental framework which centred the role of employees (Miller, 2009). Employees were no longer considered replaceable cogs in an organizational machine but were seen as potential resources that contributed to organizational productivity.

The central question for management was to secure maximum organizational efficiency by concentrating simultaneously on two types of concern: Concern for employees and concern for production. Successful management on both fronts would, ideally, result in a desired synergy effect that increased organizational productivity as the organization would benefit actively from the cognitive input of employees.

From a discourse point of view, this leads to a reinterpretation and rephrasing of managerial power. The classical power discourse of 'us' (the management) and 'them' (the workers) is reinterpreted to suit a new organizational reality in which power is no longer framed as direct control. Power and efficiency now include the successful management of employees' cognitive contributions to organizational knowledge and implicitly of managing employees' feelings and values.

In a human resources framework, managerial discourse becomes inclusive, stressing the common interests of management and employees. Expressions of direct managerial power are downplayed in favour of employee influence and common organizational interests and goals. In managerial discourse, sports metaphors typically replace the former mechanical metaphors of classical management theory. The popular sports metaphors subtly establish an organizational and cognitive framework in which the role of managers includes interpersonal and communicative skills and a concern for the organization as a team.

In a human resource perspective, managerial discourse reflects the importance of teams and team work in the realization of organizational goals. The manager takes on the role of a super coach or team leader that must demonstrate professional and interpersonal skills in relation to team management, team spirit, team building, team values etc.

Human resource metaphors:

In a human resource framework the functions of a manager are often described in sports terms. The manager is no longer an engineer but the coach supreme of the organization.

Sports metaphors include:

Organizational goals
Coaches
Teams
Team spirit
Team effort
Team work etc.

Organizations as cultures: Tribal discourse

The 1990s saw the introduction of the culture metaphor as a new way to understand and manage organizations. Borrowing its methods and models from the field of anthropology, the cultural approach to organizational theory interprets the organization in a tribal framework. Organizations are seen as different tribes, families or theatres with different rituals, discourses, values and power structures (Morgan, 1993). Tribe members are gradually assimilated into the specific tribal culture and must participate in a variety of rituals and pass culture-specific tests to become initiated into the tribe.

At the level of artefacts, tribe members demonstrate their loyalty to the tribe by downplaying their individuality e.g. by wearing company sweatshirts, jackets, ties etc., by drinking from cups bearing the company logo, by quoting company values and by singing company songs. Implicitly and explicitly, rituals, hero figures, and artefacts serve to mark one tribe, or one culture, from other tribes and other cultures.

Tribal discourse reflects the important distinction between members and non-members. 'Us' and 'them' now refer to in-groups and out-groups and mark the distinction between competing tribes, cultures or professional subcultures (Martin, 2002, Norlyk, 2002). Direct manifestations of managerial power at discourse level are discreetly downplayed, as tribe members are assimilated through rituals and rites that are non-verbal expressions of power structures.

Although verbal expressions of power and power structures are reflected in tribal storytelling and tribal hero figures, the discourse of power is often implicit as the assimilation of tribe members teaches them to recognize and accept the power structure of the tribe and to identify both chiefs as well as Indians.

Cultural metaphors:

In a cultural framework the manager is head of the family or the particular organizational tribe. He is often referred to as 'father', 'big daddy', 'Godfather', 'big chief' or simply 'God'.

Organizational cultures as tribes

Organizational cultures as families

Organizational cultures as performances and shows

Conclusion

The discourse of power is multi-faceted and dynamic. It comes in many shapes depending on the specific organizational framework in which it is realized. Dominating key metaphors such as organizations as machines, as sports teams, as tribes and families frame power in different ways. Consequently, the discourse of power is not always explicit and is not always of a strictly verbal nature. In the framework of culture, organizational rituals and rites, organizational hero figures, as well as organizational artefact are subtle but non-verbal expressions of the overall discourse of power in organizations.

Author



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She also has a practical background in middle management. Her research encompasses studies of professional subcultures in organizations, organization and intercultural communication.

She has published books and articles in Danish and English on the interplay between discourse, culture, and power in various organizational settings.

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